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Andrew Burton

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'The end of the world has already occurred.'[1]

Morton pinpoints this to April 1784, when James Watt patented the steam engine. From that point, humankind (at least, those who could afford it) became increasingly addicted to burning fossil fuels, initially to power the Industrial Revolution then, from the mid twentieth century, to drive The Great Acceleration in consumer capitalism. The resultant accumulation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (currently over 415 parts per million, against an assumed safe level of 350ppm) is now widely accepted as a major contributor to the phenomenon of global warming which in Morton's nomenclature is a 'hyperobject'; something massively distributed in time and space that humans can compute but are unable directly to see.[2] Morton playfully asserts that 'for something to happen it often needs to happen twice' (7), pointing out that the world also ended in July 1945 when the US tested 'The Gadget' in Trinity, New Mexico, ushering in the nuclear age and foreshadowing the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki the following month. So intense was this impact that a new mineral, Trinitite, was formed, by the fusing together of sand particles at a temperature ten thousand times hotter than the surface of the sun. The impact on the human imagination was arguably even greater.

Fossil fuels and radioactive materials are also hyperobjects in their own right, exhibiting five distinctive properties that Morton articulates as viscosity, nonlocality, temporal undulation, phasing and interobjectivity. Viscosity means that such hyberobjects are sticky; they are difficult to dispose of and there is no meaningful 'away' into which they might be deposited. With a half-life of 24,100

[1] Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p.7 Subsequent page references in text.

[2] Before the 18th century, when humans in the west began to burn coal, oil and gas, our atmosphere typically contained about 280 parts per million of carbon dioxide. Now, with the increased use of fossil fuels throughout the world, it is 'well over 415 parts per million'. <https://350.org/science/> (accessed 17 May 2020).

years, plutonium's longevity troubles human comprehension. Such temporal inequity makes life tricky for playwrights whose narratives tend to focus on more immediate emotions on a human scale, even if the events perturbing the characters have taken place some years in the past.

The conundrum of how to square the vast spatiotemporal dimensions of such hyperobjects with the human scale of theatre and performance is being tackled by a number of contemporary playwrights, performers and theatre makers, whose work investigates the human condition in our current age of ecological crisis. The dramatic forms they employ range from naturalism (in plays such as Steve Waters' diptych *The Contingency Plan* and Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*); to experiments in post-dramatic theatre (such as Claire MacDonald's *Storm from Paradise*); and to reconfigured Brechtian epic (as in Ella Hickson's *Oil*) or Shakespearean epic (for example, Mike Bartlett's *Earthquakes in London*). Catharine Diamond[3] has written insightfully about the limits and possibilities of a number of dramatic genres adopted by playwrights in their quest to stage global warming. She observes that comedic plays (such as Duncan Macmillan's *Lungs* and Richard Bean's *The Heretic*) 'attempt the...restoration of normalcy' (102), especially in relation to sex and safety, whereas tragedy, according to Joseph Meeker, from whose *The Comedy of Survival* she quotes, is '...a process of ritual purification that reaffirms the moral order...' (104). She argues that the plays she examines tend either to work within a genre's conventions or formally to extend the limits of those conventions but that *Ten Billion* — a performance-lecture directed by Katie Mitchell and performed by its scientist author Stephen Emmott — stands out by having made 'the most visceral impact on the London critics' (119) in its eschewal of traditional dramatic conventions and in its graphic presentation of unadorned scientific evidence. In this essay, I attempt to extend Diamond's analysis by questioning efficacy of form rather than genre. I question how the epic form, with its intrinsically open time, open place structure (*pace* Jeffreys) affords the playwright a way of engaging with the hyperobject's ontological vastness. I further ask how naturalism — with its typically closed time, closed space structure and its focus on characters being forced to make moral or ethical decisions under intense pressure — allows the

[3] Catherine Diamond, 'Staging Global Warming, the Genre-Bending Hyperobject', in *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 30, no. 2 (2016), pp. 101-123. Subsequent page references in text.

playwright to grapple with the hyperobject's spatiotemporal enormity. Finally, I suggest that in *Lungs* Duncan Macmillan has his dramaturgical cake and eats it by pioneering a hybridized form that offers a novel and highly affective way of tackling the hyperobject.

Oil by Ella Hickson (2016)

May, the protagonist of *Oil*, first appears as a twenty year-old farm worker, three months pregnant. It is 1889, the industrial revolution is well under way but the Singer farm in Cornwall, where she works, has not yet been illuminated by modernity. When a stranger, the American entrepreneur William Whitcomb, turns up uninvited late one dark winter's evening, he is met with suspicion and hostility by the men of the house but May allows him into the candlelit room and offers him tea. Whitcomb has come to ask permission to buy the Singers' land, for the storage and distribution of kerosene which he refers to as 'this here miracle...[which]...was made when the earth started' (18). He lights the kerosene lamp he has brought with him, a sort of magic lantern that immediately floods the farmhouse room with light like 'the clear, strong, brilliant light of day' (17). It illuminates the dark corners of the space which have hitherto been obscured. In so doing, it also reveals May's brother-in-law Samuel who is caught 'squeezing the back of his wife Anne's neck cruelly hard in the dark...she's crying' (18) and thus also sheds light on misogyny. The matriarch Ma Singer exclaims 'God Almighty' while May is 'mesmerised' by the luminescence (18). A little kerosene has spilt onto the table and May puts it on her finger, savouring its strange odour. Poignantly, Whitcomb tells the entranced May 'There are millions of years right there on the end of your finger' (18). With this intimate, multi-sensory and intensely theatrical gesture, Hickson juxtaposes the vast temporality of oil alongside human ephemerality, a dynamic tension that will resonate throughout the play.

Asked by Dan Rebellato what lay behind her decision to have a protagonist who ages more slowly than the 160 years of history she moves through, Hickson explained:

> I knew I wanted to hit certain points in history and I knew I wanted one protagonist to last for the whole play so there was a basic, pragmatic need there to fulfil. I think there was something about the fact that oil itself has a lot of time condensed inside it...a single drop of oil has billions of years in it, so it felt like that was permission for the single drop of May to have more than a lifetime inside her...I really wanted to map somehow the

> arrogance and ambition of the pursuit of oil...There is a kind of petulance to mankind that you have taken a billion years of creation and you have splurted it in 250 years.[4]

The first four of the play's five parts centre around technological innovation driven by oil and its derivatives; in the final part, the innovation is powered by nuclear reaction. After Part One's rural, late nineteenth century setting, Part Two, set in 1908, shows members of the British Admiralty attempting to negotiate a deal over Persian oil production with Iran, to fuel British imperialist expansionism. Part Three's suburban 1970 Hampstead setting reveals a household replete with labour-saving devices and a proliferation of oil-derived products (in an outburst against her daughter Amy's boyfriend Nate, May spells out the ubiquity of oil, even with regard to their sex lives: 'Durex — lubricant — KY Jelly and even Vaseline if you're on a budget and — actually — now I come to think of it, the contraceptive pill...All made of oil' [59]). In this speech, even women's supposed emancipation through the use of oral contraceptives is linked to the ubiquity of oil. Part Four sees Amy and her friend Aminah in 2021 driving in the desert in Kurdistan, listening to music via apps on their smart phones, while Aminah's mother cannot afford fuel for a generator to provide light while she eats. This neatly signposts the long-term impacts of extractive capitalism and its ongoing colonial legacy. In the play's final part, the now aged May and her grown-up daughter Amy live in a modernised version of the Singer's Cornish farm in 2051. Impoverished, they are unable to heat the water for a bath because they are suffering a 'black patch', a recurring drop in the electricity supply, but are offered the opportunity to purchase a device called the Toroid, which creates almost endless supplies of heat, light and electricity by means of a cold fusion reaction. In a grotesque parody of late capitalism's opportunistic commodification, the sales rep admits that the Nangto Corporation (the Chinese company that has developed the Toroid) harvests the device's nuclear material, Helium 3, from the moon. The play's mood of apocalypticism can most keenly be felt in this unsettling final scene. The futuristic Toroid embodies what Žižek refers to as 'techno-digital-post-human' apocalypticism, one of 'at least three different versions of apocalypticism today', the others being Christian

[4] Dan Rebellato, 'Fourth Wall: Playwrights in Lockdown — Ella Hickson', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIsUahE9wiY> (accessed 20 May 2020).

Fundamentalist and New Age.[5]

A mood of apocalypticism pervades the very fabric of Hickson's play, enmeshed with a notion of the finitude of natural resources. It is as if, inverting Kermode's narrative urge for the sense of an ending,[6] Hickson is seeking *a* sense of *the* ending. For the exasperated Aminah in Part Four, the end of commercial extraction of oil in her country is something to look forward to: 'There was been war in my country as long as I've been alive. She lets them sell the oil — maybe it will run out quicker and at last we can have some peace' (95).

The preparation and consumption of chicken recurs as a leitmotif throughout the play. In Part One, May struggles to pluck, eviscerate and prepare a chicken that appears to be 'off'. The meagre fowl is an unappetising prospect but one of the farm workers' few sources of protein. By the time we reach suburban Hampstead in 1970, the career-driven May, riding the second wave of feminism and choosing not to cook, has brought home a microwavable chicken from the supermarket. In the Kurdistan desert in 2021, May encourages Amy to eat by offering her a chicken sandwich. In Part Five, there is some chicken in the fridge but it remains uneaten because the fridge has 'gone warm'. This progression of increasingly effortless ways to consume chicken is not accidental; the chicken symbolises not only humankind's commodification of natural resources and dominion over the animal kingdom but is also a semiotic marker of the Anthropocene: in 2016, the year *Oil* was written, the Working Group on the Anthropocene advised the International Geological Congress in Cape Town formally to adopt the term 'Anthropocene' and, according to one of its contributors Jan Zalasiewicz, cited 'the bones left by the global proliferation of the domestic chicken' as 'one of the distinctive proponents of the sedimentary strata now forming' (others being 'radioactive elements dispersed across the planet by nuclear-bomb tests' and 'plastic pollution').[7]

Plays that are dramaturgically open both in time and place tend to focus on ideas, whereas plays that are closed in both time and place, are what Jeffreys calls 'pressure cooker' plays, forcing

[5] Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, (London and New York: Verso, 2011), p.336

[6] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

[7] Jan Zalasiewicz, *Rocks: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp.122-4.

characters to make moral or ethical decisions with no means of physical escape and no chance to defer the decision.[8] By empowering her protagonist to venture in a non-naturalistic way from the late nineteenth century to an imagined mid twenty-first century, via key historical loci, Hickson situates *Oil* firmly as a play of ideas. It feels Brechtian in its reach and indeed there is a sense of Brechtian epic in the 'interscenes' that punctuate each of the play's five parts. Of May's husband Joss, a stage direction even explains *'He's carrying bags full of things, there's something Mother Courage about him'* (109). Between Parts Three and Four, the interscene tells us

> *A woman flies across a desert.*
> *She flies and flies and flies and flies.*
>
> *Toddlers are shot in the back*
> *By planes with no pilots in them.*
>
> *She asks the hostess for extra ice.*
> *She flies above time.* (85)

There is an intoxicating sense of liberation in such writing, reflecting May's progress from a Victorian farm worker with limited horizons to transnational career woman later in the play. This contrasts starkly with the suspension of disbelief and emotional engagement prompted by Lucy Kirkwood's naturalistic play *The Children*.

The Children by Lucy Kirkwood (2016)

Kirkwood's play, which premiered just one month after *Oil*, in November 2016, also has a hyperobject at its heart. The characters, meeting in a small cottage on the east coast of England, are forced to deal with the effects of a disastrous accident at a nearby nuclear reprocessing plant, clearly modelled on Sizewell B in Suffolk.

Hazel, Robin and Rose, all in their sixties, used to work at the plant approximately thirty-five years earlier. The nuclear incident that has occurred has created explosions and 'a wave', devastating a large area surrounding the site and leading to the creation of an exclusion zone, reminiscent of that of Chernobyl. Rose is setting up a team of experts to help contain the damage and to prevent an even

[8] Stephen Jeffreys, 'Time and Place Structure' in *Playwriting* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2019), pp.28-59

more devastating incident happening, relieving the team of people currently working on the problem who are mostly in their twenties and thirties. She wants to help 'These...*young people* these *children*, basically, actually with their whole lives ahead and it's not fair it's not right it seems *wrong*. Doesn't it?' (48, emphasis in original text). The play's central narrative question is whether Rose can persuade Hazel and Robin to join her in her quest. Their moral dilemma is problematised by the fact that Robin and Rose have previously had an affair and by the parental responsibility Robin and Hazel feel (although Rose has had no children, Robin and Hazel have had four).

In *The Children*, mistakes made a generation ago implicate the present day characters; Rose, Hazel and Robin could have addressed safety issues inherent in the building's design when they were working at the nuclear plant around the time Hazel and Robin's first child was born. But the difficulty is that many humans (particularly, it could be argued, those living in relative affluence in the Global North) appear hardwired to think in the shorter term. Asked by Royal Court Associate Director Lucy Morrison in a *The Children* platform discussion to react to a Native American environmental proverb — 'In every deliberation we must consider the impact of the seventh generation, even if it requires having skin as thick as bark' — Kirkwood replied

> Is that possible? I don't think I can imagine my great grandchildren...it's one of those ideas that's too enormous to hold in your head. *I* don't understand tracker mortgages!... how do you hold seven generations in your head? That's what makes it difficult because we're such short term beings and we operate on, like, 'where's our holiday next year going to be?' And that's about as far ahead as our diaries get.[9]

The events of the play unfold in real time over the course of a summer evening, which darkens to night during the action. This closed time, closed place dramaturgy enables Kirkwood to show us the characters *in extremis*, with no means of escape and under pressure to make a decision that is likely to hasten their own demise. It exemplifies what Waters calls 'The pure aim of naturalism, epitomised by Zola's aspiration for a play to be *'une tranche de vie'*,...the continuous, unbroken scene, devoid of authorial intervention, laid out like an experiment from which the audience draw their own conclusions'.[10]

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[9] Lucy Kirkwood, Royal Court Theatre platform discussion of *The Children*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68eFaUKABMc&t=773s> (accessed 17 May 2020)

[10] Steve Waters, *The Secret Life of Plays,* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2010), p.44. Subsequent page references in text.

It may be set on a summer's evening but the characters are in the autumn of their lives. Their time is running out, exacerbated by illness (Rose has undergone chemotherapy and a mastectomy while Robin coughs blood, the result of prolonged exposure to radiation from a contaminated dairy farm).

Explaining her decision to write in such a naturalistic style, Kirkwood said later in the discussion:

> It's very instinctive with me...The plays tend to find the form they need to be in...In its bones...[the play is] dealing with an emergency situation...all those people in that room are dealing with decisions on lots of levels that they made thirty, forty years ago...the reason we find climate change difficult to talk about is the reason we find our own deaths hard to talk about; because it's about the end of us, about there not being any more, looking at our own extinction...

In *Underland*, Robert Macfarlane visits Olkiluoto Island in south-west Finland where a tomb is under construction which is 'intended to outlast not only the people who designed it, but also the species that designed it'.[11] Its name is Onkalo which in Finnish means 'cave' or 'hiding place' and its purpose is to house high-level nuclear waste. The storage room will have four small doors, each secured by sliding stone doors in which will be carved warnings to future, possibly post-human, species. But what semiotics can pertain when faced with the unimaginable enormity of radiological time? What signs or language could possibly warn future beings of the dangers that lie within? As Macfarlane observes, '...language seems irrelevant compared to the deep time stone-space of Onkalo and what it will hold. The half-life of uranium-235 is 4.46 billion years: such chronology decentres the human, crushing the first person to an irrelevance'. For Rose, Hazel and Robin in *The Children* the challenge is to find not linguistic but emotional articulacy. Occasional hints of the nuclear catastrophe that has engulfed their lives surface from time to time, chilling in their mundanity: Hazel advises 'Tell Maria not to fret. Two of mine went through the same thing. Hm. Cayenne pepper. Dab it around the nostrils. Helps it clot' (77) and when Hazel exclaims 'What am I supposed to feel guilty about? I've done my bit. I I I I I I I...', Robin attempts to reassure her by saying 'You helped them remove the topsoil from the playground, didn't you?' (54).

[11] Robert Macfarlane, *Underland: a deep time journey* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019), pp.398-420

Lungs by Duncan Macmillan (2011)

Waters asserts 'There is no absolute notion of fast or slow in the theatre; tempo is particular to the story being told.' (72) If this is true, then *Lungs* is essentially constructed as two stories. The first, occupying roughly the first 70 pages of the script, is comedic in tone and centres around the sexual and romantic tribulations of an unnamed heterosexual couple who are wracked with ethical doubt about the environmental impact of becoming parents. The second, occupying roughly the last ten pages of the script, telescopes time in an extraordinary way, harnessing a reconfigured Brechtian aesthetic to create a sort of lurching *Verfremdungseffekt* but one which emotionally engages rather than estranges. When the couple meet late in the play, having temporarily separated, the male character reveals that he is affianced, and she reveals that she is pregnant with their child. From this moment on, the play's tempo increases exponentially and within the course of a few pages, with fragmented dialogue and no scene, lighting or costume changes, we witness their child being born, growing up, moving away, the male character becoming ill then dying and the widowed female character delivering a monologue at his graveside. She is living in the dystopian future they feared when they were younger, climate devastation having become their new reality. She says

> I miss talking to you. Here I am talking to myself.
> Your forests have gone. I don't watch the news any
> More, it all just gets worse and worse.
> Everything's covered in ash...
> ...It's a nice cool
> day today, like we used to have. (97)

These final ten pages offer an affective meditation on the ephemerality of human existence in a ravaged world, putting the concerns expressed in the first part of the play into a wider ecological and biological perspective. In performance, the impact of Macmillan's audacious dramaturgical conceit is disorienting and deeply moving. The characters' acute emotional vulnerability is amplified by the play's austere performance aesthetic; the stage directions stipulate that *'There is no scenery, no furniture, no props and no mime. There are no costume changes. Light and sound should not be used to indicate a change in time or place'.*

Lungs affects us by first showing the woman and man in emotional close-up, struggling with the messy minutiae of life and love, then telescoping time to reveal the insignificance of our mundane anxieties when contrasted with the ephemerality of life and the rapid anthropogenic degradation of the natural world. By the time the curtain falls (not that there is a curtain), it feels as if the end of the world has indeed already occurred.

Generic hybridisation is well established in drama, from Polonius' bathetic 'tragical-comical-historical-pastoral' to Beckett's playful categorisation of *Waiting for Godot* as 'tragi-comedy'. The dramaturgical road less travelled is a road of hybridised form rather than hybridised genre. As the example of *Lungs* suggests, such formal hybridisation may open the doors for playwrights, theatre makers and performers to create new and experimental modes of expression that are aptly suited to grappling with the ontological vastness of the hyperobject.

Conclusion

Ella Hickson's *Oil* imaginatively stretches time to show Victorian characters from rural Cornwall appearing in Tehran, Hampstead, Baghdad and back to Cornwall, and flitting from 1889 to a projected 2051. The characters' lives are bound together by the viscosity of the play's eponymous substance and the play's epic, non-naturalistic form allows space for themes to emerge that resonate across the generations. This dramaturgy enables Hickson to align human temporality with that of the hyperobject and this coalesces around striking theatrical imagery such as when May holds a drop of kerosene oil on the tip of her finger, embodying the human and more-than-human scales simultaneously. Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children*, by contrast, exploits the conventions of naturalism to put its characters under intense pressure in their attempts to deal with the effects of a catastrophic accident at a nuclear reactor on the east coast of England. The spatiotemporal enormity of the accident is at odds with the characters' socially oriented concerns, revealing an emotional inarticulacy that speaks volumes about their devastated inner worlds. True to form, the naturalistic dramaturgy requires the focus to be on a moral issue (in this case, whether Rose can persuade her two former colleagues to join her in the clear-up operation, to relieve pressure from the younger generation, the play's titular children).

Duncan Macmillan's *Lungs* mixes dramaturgical forms: it opens in one theatrical tempo and ends in an entirely different one, flouting Ayckbourn's warning '...not to mix time speeds in a single play. It is confusing to an audience and can lead to a form of travel sickness'.[12] The final moments of *Lungs* align human and ecological time scales in a highly innovative way that contextualises the characters' emotional, romantic and sexual tribulations within a much wider perspective. *Lungs*' hybridized form thus allows Macmillan not only to exploit naturalism's inherent focus on individual moral choice but also to exploit the epic form's spatiotemporal fluidity and in so doing offers a highly affective memento mori of humankind's relative insignificance vis-à-vis ecological timeframes.

[12] Alan Ayckbourn, *The Crafty Art of Playmaking*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 22.

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